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21 September 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: Associate Deputy Director for Intelligence  
SUBJECT : COINS Plans  
REFERENCE : AD/DCI/IC Memo for the Record on COINS  
dtd 11 Sep 73

1. This memorandum provides background and comments on the points raised at the recent PFIAB half-day review of COINS as summarized by [ ]

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2. The six priority actions and the four "lesser important" actions identified in the review are not new. Most of the background data on these proposals is available in the [ ] draft summary previously forwarded. My additional comments on each follow:

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a. Acting in concert with USIB committees as much as possible, data standards (spellings, formats, units, etc.) should be established---I agree in principle with this proposed action but standardization is very expensive in manpower and time and it is exceedingly difficult to achieve. The IHC has had a subcommittee on data standards for several years; it has generally been ineffectual. Data standards for subject codes, area codes, place name standardization, security classification, dissemination controls, name recording, nationality and occupation codes, positions, format, and etc., are difficult and extremely expensive to develop and almost impossible to police. Effective standardization can only be achieved through a large community staff or by having file input done by one agency under one management.

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Standardization results in machine files that are more expensive to build and maintain than required for in-house needs. For example, the USIB standard for armed forces grades consists of alpha-numeric codes which are difficult to use and understand and fairly expensive for input processing. CRS prefers a standardized clear text abbreviation for military grades, e.g., Lt. or MGen.

b. Each COINS file should have assigned responsible agency and individual and for file maintenance. The content of files should be validated by the appropriate USIB committee---This procedure exists now in that the Agency supplying the COINS file is responsible for the file and its maintenance. The proposal is, I think, much broader. The Malkin report recommended that an agency be assigned the responsibility for building files for community use even though the responsible agency had no internal need. This Malkin recommendation may be the basis for this proposed action. If this were adopted, CRS could be assigned responsibility for building a new major biographic machine file (such as the one on foreign diplomatic personnel previously proposed by the COINS staff).

I assume "validation" in this instance means review and inspection to determine if a file meets COINS specifications for standards, source coverage, currency or whatever. Such a proposal could impact considerably on CRS (see above remarks on standards).

c. Files which are non-all-source should have caveats stated and references cited to other files of related or complementary intelligence---What is proposed here is not clear. Very few files, COINS or otherwise, are truly all-source. The COINS management may have in mind files at the Secret level which would reference similar files available at the SI or TKH level or they may have in mind alerting the user of the FinIntel file to the existence of the bibliographic file on SIGINT.

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d. Files which are updated periodically ought to be put into summary files so that trends and statistical data are available---This action could not be universally applied. It would be impossible to apply this proposal to the CRS bibliographic files now in COINS. It could be done for some NSA files on aircraft movements. This, however, puts NSA into the analytic business even more. It also could be done for the CRS leader appearances files but it would be expensive and would mean additional requirements on CRS. The results would be of little utility.

e. Queries susceptible to answering at different levels of aggregation ought to result in hierarchical files which lead the questioner to the answer he requires---I agree that this is a "good" feature but it can be achieved only through complex indexing techniques combined with complex software; each increases overall file costs. In many instances, hierarchy is not required.

f. Files which do not meet the criteria above should be upgraded or retired---The most important criteria ought to be cost effectiveness and the capability of a file to meet user requirements.

g. Devices (daily intelligence reports, COINS system status and so forth) which generate frequent COINS contact ought to be experimented with---This can be achieved with some of the NSA formatted data files. CRS, however, has found that users request printouts of these files on a weekly or monthly basis rather than daily. Furthermore, most of the CIA requests could be handled in an off-line batch mode rather than an interactive on-line mode. I suspect that the daily devices referenced here could be handled in the same manner. This suggestion again reflects COINS management view that COINS is necessarily a good thing if we would only use it. This assumption is questionable.

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h. Measures of effectiveness of COINS and state-of-the-system measures ought to be developed so that managers understand whether progress is being made---I can only add I strongly agree. CIA has been proposing evaluation since Phase I of COINS. COINS has never been systematically evaluated to determine its ability to meet user requirements, to determine sources of system failure and to determine how these failures may best be remedied. Most of all, its cost effectiveness relative to paper files and telephones has been completely avoided.

i. The customer services program ought to be expanded moderately---I don't know what this recommendation means. If the COINS concept is meeting a legitimate user requirement, no action is necessary other than announcing that the service is available.

j. The community ought to be educated that the storage and retrieval of information is a part of the intelligence process, i.e., requirements, collection, processing, storage and retrieval, production, dissemination--- This is a God and motherhood statement. I do not think there is any question in the minds of CIA officials that storage and retrieval of information is an integral part of the intelligence process. Storage and retrieval of information does not necessarily mean on-line machine files and the concepts are not congruent with COINS. Each DDI production office stores and retrieves information according to its requirements. CRS is building centralized storage and retrieval files to complement these individual efforts and to serve as contingency files. Again, the assumption behind the item is that COINS is the "true way."

3. It is impossible to disagree with the two generalized problems facing COINS described in paragraph 1 of the Martin memo because they are not unlike the problems facing any machine-based file system. The major unanswered question not posed in this memo is the value of the COINS network to the community and to the Agency and should \$3.7 million be expended for such an effort. This question has never been faced by the proponents of COINS.

  
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